

## **Walking the Ancient Tea Horse Road: The Rise of the Outdoors and China's First Long Distance Branded Hiking Trail**

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### **Abstract**

Having made the transition from a life-time acquired skill to something acquired by the casual tourist through a professional operator, outdoor 'adventure' tourism is now one of the fastest growing sectors. After having experienced the initial stages of the development of mass tourism, the tourism market in China is undergoing a period of significant diversification in which outdoor adventure tourism in the form of hiking is also a key growth area. In China the hikers, known as 'donkey friends', are growing in numbers and exploring new destinations to engage in short and long distance treks. As a result, whilst outdoor adventure tourism presents itself as a valuable opportunity, its development is constrained by the lack of adequate planning, management and infrastructure, and by the potential negative impacts of overcapacity on fragile ecosystems. In this paper we argue that the Ancient Tea Horse Road (ATHR) – a series of ancient trade and administrative networks criss-crossing Southwest China – could prove to be an excellent foundation for creating a world class hiking infrastructure and a hiking trail that as a brand could attract many domestic and international hikers. It is also a tool for 'thinking out loud' the challenges and opportunities that such a proposal presents in the Chinese context thereby giving insights into broader trends in outdoor tourism.

**Keywords:** China; Hiking; Ecotourism; Outdoor Tourism; Adventure Tourism; Nature-Based Tourism

Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over civilised people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.

John Muir 1901

### **Introduction**

Having made the transition from a life-time acquired skill to something that is packaged and acquired by the casual tourist through a professional operator (Cater and Cloke, 2007), outdoor 'adventure' tourism is now one of the fastest growing sectors of the international tourism industry. The 'wild outdoors' have now been 'tamed' and made accessible to ordinary folk looking for 'adventure' and the pursuit of 'outdoor lifestyle choices'. After having experienced the initial stages of the development of mass tourism, the tourism market in China is now undergoing a period of significant diversification in which outdoor adventure tourism in the form of

hiking (*tubu lüyou* 徒步旅游) is a key growth area.<sup>1</sup> In China the hikers, known as 'donkey friends' (*lüyou* 驴友), are growing in numbers and exploring new destinations to engage in short and long distance treks. Chinese hikers are seeking out on-the-trail experiences that provide inspiration through engaging with nature and challenges that foster physical and emotional development. Much of this is taking place on an individual basis in small self-organised social groups and, to a lesser extent although growing steadily as demand increases, through commercial outdoor tourism operators. Yet in China at the moment there is little in the way of well developed and managed hiking trails to accommodate this growing field of recreational activity in an ecologically sustainable manner that is also culturally sensitive to local communities and their heritage. As a result, whilst outdoor adventure tourism presents itself as a valuable opportunity, its development is constrained by the lack of adequate planning, management and infrastructure, and by the potential negative impacts of overcapacity on fragile ecosystems.

In this paper we argue that the Ancient Tea Horse Road (ATHR) – a series of ancient trade and administrative networks criss-crossing Southwest China – could prove to be an excellent foundation for creating a world class hiking infrastructure and a hiking trail that as a brand could attract many domestic and international hikers. An ATHR-branded hiking trail is forwarded here both as a genuine proposal and as a basis for thinking through the challenges of developing hiking tourism and trails in China. For the purposes of this paper we focus on the ATHR network as it exists in the southwest province of Yunnan, one of the most ethnically, botanically and topographically diverse regions in the world and is already a much favoured destination for domestic and international hikers. The ATHR is also already a well-established brand on the mass cultural tourism circuit and has been exploited by local governments and tourism operators across Yunnan (Sigley, 2013). We thus argue that as a branded destination 'Yunnan' combined with the 'Ancient Tea Horse

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately given the relative lack of interest from Chinese tourist authorities in hiking and adventure tourism there are no reliable statistics available and the authors are basing this claim on close personal observation over the last five years and on the work of the handful of Chinese scholars and writers who have written on the subject in newspapers, magazines and online. At the very least, the growing size and significance of the annual IPSO Beijing international sport and outdoor trade exhibition, first held in 2005, is testimony to the increasing presence of 'outdoor sport and lifestyles' as part of the consumer lifestyle economy and an integral part of recreational industry business strategy and marketing. See: <http://ispo.com/beijing/en/All-Sports/PRESS/Press-releases?clb=53.201.4.12.359991> [accessed 1 April 2013].

Road' offers a unique platform from which to consider the construction of China's first international-standard designated hiking trail.

However, to date there has been very little in the way of research within China, or indeed elsewhere, on outdoor tourism and hiking in the Chinese context. This proposal, in thinking through the challenges and opportunities, seeks to catalyse debate and further research within China and abroad. We argue that this growing sector is in urgent need of theoretical, conceptual and physical intervention for the following reasons.

Firstly, the opening up of 'nature' to Chinese and foreign hikers is welcome but to date has not received the considered attention of relevant government authorities. The tourism market in China is heavily biased towards large-scale commercial mass tourism. The aforementioned lack of research partly reflects this much stronger interest from the public and private sectors in the development of mass tourism. Yet whilst adventure tourism may not appear to generate the income experienced in other more explicitly commercially orientated tourism sectors we argue here that this bias against hikers, and the associated 'backpacker' tourist, needs serious reconsideration. Hikers as backpacker tourists (that is, as independent travellers) on average spend more time and money on location than the tourist as part of a packaged tour. For instance, as Huang Xiang (2005) notes in his summary of international research on hiker and backpacker activity, hikers and backpackers often end up spending more money on site than does the average tourist as part of a mass tourist package precisely for the reason that he/she spends much more time in the area (see Jarvis and Peel, 2008). The hikers are also much more likely to direct their income towards local communities (and not the accommodation, restaurants and so forth that form the chain of mass tourism and which are in many cases owned and operated by non-locals).

Secondly, as China continues its rapid transition towards a modern industrial/post-industrial society, market forces and the desire to improve standards of living are not only transforming the cities and countryside along China's eastern seaboard. Many once remote and relatively 'natural' regions in Yunnan province along the ATHR, for example, are turning attention to nearby resources looking for further means of

exploitation. In this scheme of things forests and ecosystems are under threat of destruction as farmers switch to plantation crops such as rubber, sugar cane, and eucalyptus. We believe that through the coordinated and planned development of hiking and outdoor tourism, local farmers and communities can begin to see significant value in maintaining existing forests and ecosystems rather than destroying them.

Thirdly, hiking infrastructure requires much less overall investment when compared with the development of 'scenic zones' (which is the preferred development model in China) and, in so doing, is well suited for ecologically sensitive areas where carrying capacity and sustainability are serious issues. Hence the proposal we are making here is entirely affordable. The real challenge lies in the mobilisation and education of key stakeholders. Our proposal, it should be noted, is based on commercial interest. We see the development of the ATHR as a branded hiking trail as a public good, beneficial to local communities who can reap the rewards of a well-managed trail and to trail users who can enjoy the natural surroundings and health benefits associated with hiking.

In short, we argue here that the benefits of developing hiking infrastructure to facilitate outdoor tourism include the diversification of Yunnan's tourism sector; the strategic mobilisation of a growing market for adventure and outdoor leisure activities both internationally and within China itself; the consolidation of forests and nature reserves as sustainable resources for nature-based tourism; and opportunities for poverty alleviation through the development of community-based participation in adventure tourist and hiking activity.

In what follows we outline the development of hiking tourism internationally and provide some examples of world class designated hiking trails that may serve as models for what could be accomplished in Yunnan. This in turn leads to an overview of the development of hiking tourism in China with special emphasis on the 'donkey friends'. We then proceed to discuss the branding of a designated hiking trail in Yunnan in more detail. This includes an analysis of the natural and cultural assets in

Yunnan associated with the 'Ancient Tea Horse Road'<sup>2</sup>. The challenges and obstacles in developing these as an 'adventure tourism' experience of international standard will also be outlined.

### **International Hiking Tourism and World's Best Practice**

International hiking tourism has experienced rapid growth in interest and participation in recent years. There are now a number of world class hiking trails offering a diverse array of ecological and cultural experiences. By 'world class' we mean that these trails combine the desirable features of well managed trails in terms of conservation, sustainability and accessibility. They are also, as a rule, generally very conscious of the 'brand' that is being developed to attract hiking tourists. Some of the more well established and well known hiking trails include the Overland Track of Tasmania (Australia), the Juan De Fuca Marine trail (Canada), the El Yunque trail (Puerto Rica), and the Taman Negara rainforest trail (Malaysia). Here we will describe some of the features of the Appalachian Trail (United States) and Bibbulmun Track (Western Australia) which we believe make them noteworthy as examples of the innovative arrangements in place to facilitate sustainable hiking.

Designated hiking trails generally have a well-defined path with a number of rest and/or camping sites along the way. Some of the shorter trails may be completed in a single day, but typically involve at least several days of hiking. The longer trails may take several weeks or even several months to complete. In many cases, especially with the longer trails, hikers may choose to undertake shorter sections of their own choice. Such trails can be accessed either privately as individuals or small groups, or as part of a package provided by a commercial outdoor tourism operator. As interest in hiking in wilderness sites has increased so too has the potential that hikers will impact negatively on the environment. Rather than having hikers wander at will through ecologically sensitive sites, many of which are designated as national parks or nature reserves, hikers may be restricted to certain sections along a well-defined path. Some of the more popular hiking trails, such as the Overland Track in Tasmania (Australia), go a step further and limit the number of hikers on the trail at

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<sup>2</sup> For a video of Ed Jocelyn and guests with a mule team on the ATHR (English subtitles) see: <http://redrocktrek.com/blog/?p=926>

any one time and require that all hikers register in advance. These kinds of hiker capacity management systems need to be considered in the Chinese context.

It is sometimes assumed that there is also a strong sense of ethical responsibility amongst hikers that in some ways makes them stand in contrast to your typical tourist. In places where the hiking activity passes through poor communities, such as in Nepal, hikers may be keen to ensure that their activities are both culturally respectful and also contribute in some way to benefiting local communities, such as through the use of locally trained trail guides and staying in community-based accommodation where possible. However, although we can make some deductive links between an interest in nature and the sense of social and environmental responsibility amongst hikers, it is not always safe to come to such conclusions. As we argue here, different societies will develop different hiking cultures. In terms of the natural environment some aspects of such cultures will appear to be more desirable than others. Hiking cultures can also change over time. In present-day China, we argue, the existing hiking culture is not yet conducive to achieving ecological preservation and community-based development goals. As we shall explain further below, part of the challenge in developing a branded hiking trail in China lies in changing the existing hiking culture. This transformative and educational aspect should be factored in to the development of any branded trail. It is for these reasons that we stress the careful and critical examination of world's best practice.

### **The Appalachian National Scenic Trail**

The Appalachian National Scenic Trail, generally known as the Appalachian Trail (AT), is a marked hiking trail in the eastern United States extending between Springer Mountain in Georgia and Mount Katahdin in Maine.<sup>3</sup> At approximately 3,507 km it is among the longest marked hiking trails in the world. In its more than seventy years of history, over ten thousand people have walked the entire length of the trail and those who complete a trail from end to end are known as 'thru (sic) hikers'. Many millions have walked portions of the trail, and those who complete sections of a trail are known as 'section hikers'. The trail is in theory free for all to use

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<sup>3</sup> For a video of Ed Jocelyn and Chinese journalists on the Appalachian trail (dialogue in Chinese only) see: <http://redrocktrek.com/blog/?p=709>

and is marketed as a public asset. However, some portions of the trail that pass through national parks require permits for camping. The fees are made affordable as the creators of the trail viewed it as a public asset that should be available to all socio-economic groups. We believe that affordability and equality of access is also an important issue to be considered in the Chinese context as many hikers come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. If these hikers cannot be accommodated into a branded trail they may well decide to hike elsewhere and therefore risk causing ecological harm, not to mention putting themselves in danger in the so-called 'wilderness'. They would also miss out on the educative aspects that the branded trail seeks to impart to all users.

The Appalachian Trail was first conceived in 1921 by Benton Mackaye (1921), a student and then lecturer at Harvard University and later a professional forester. Mackaye developed the concept as an aid to help people recuperate from the travails of modern life at a time of rapid industrialisation (promoting clean air, clean water, good company, wholesome thoughts, and quietude) at a time when the 'leisure economy', a result of the development of 'spare time' during the course of modernisation and industrialisation, was just developing in the United States. Mackaye envisioned the use of this 'spare time' to collectively build and enjoy a well-structured system of trails that was open for all to use as a means to escape the demands of modern life – for 'recreation, recuperation and employment'. The trail was completed in 1937. The majority passes through wilderness, although some portions do traverse towns. In terms of timing it could be argued that China is in a somewhat similar historical position at present with a rapid transition taking place towards a modern industrial society with growing time for leisure pursuits and a similar desire to escape the urban environs for the rejuvenating vistas of a more natural environment. Hence, to reiterate one of the main points of this paper, now is a necessary and timely moment for intervention in the Chinese context.

The Appalachian Trail has over many decades grown to become a well-managed resource (although not without its problems and detractors) that attracts visitors from all over the United States and internationally. Since 1968 it has been incorporated into the United States' system of National Parks and the AT has not been immune from the problems and detractors of that system, especially as regards over-

commercialization and over-use. In terms of its instructive value in the Chinese context, however, we prefer to focus on the AT's unique legacy of experimental trail design and the large number of examples and associated research it offers for study, inspiration and/or emulation (see for example Leung and Marion, 1999). From the point of view of environmental conservation, research on trampling impacts suggests that 'the majority of resource impacts associated with trail use occur with initial or low levels of use.'<sup>4</sup> As visitor numbers go up in popular areas, further impacts are relatively marginal. Focusing use on trails specifically designed to sustain high levels of foot traffic should appeal to Chinese managers and government officials whose instinct is to corral tourists into 'scenic areas', while leaving open the possibility of developing permit systems to control access to more sensitive areas.

The path is maintained by thirty-one trail clubs, and managed by the National Park Service (<http://www.nps.gov/appa/index.htm>) and the not-for-profit Appalachian Trail Conservancy (<http://www.appalachiantrail.org>). The Appalachian Trail Conservancy is a volunteer-based organization dedicated to the preservation and management of the natural, scenic, historic, and cultural resources associated with the Appalachian National Scenic Trail in order to provide outdoor-recreation and educational opportunities for trail visitors. Each year more than 6,000 registered volunteers contribute almost 220,600 hours of work to the maintenance of the track and development of public awareness of the trail. China too has a growing volunteer and non-profit sector which could be mobilised to tackle some of the challenges facing the development of outdoor tourism and leisure (Hoffman, 2012).

### **The Bibbulmun Track**

The Bibbulmun Track, a thousand-kilometre trail located in the southwest of Western Australia, was officially established in 1998. In its short life it has received many tourist awards.<sup>5</sup> The Bibbulmun Track is managed by the Western Australian Department of Parks and Wildlife (formerly known as the Department of Environment and Conservation) with assistance from the Bibbulmun Track Foundation. The Bibbulmun Track Foundation (<http://www.bibbulmuntrack.org.au>) is a not-for-profit

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.americantrails.org/resources/wildlife/Visitor-use-Appalachian-Trail.html> [accessed April 25, 2013].

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.bibbulmuntrack.org.au/the-track/awards/> [accessed April 25, 2013].



grass-roots organisation which supports the promotion, maintenance and proper use and enjoyment of the trail (Bramptom, Maher, & Keating, 1999). According to statistics compiled in 2008 the track is experiencing 430,000 visits each year which is the equivalent of 167,000 walks averaging 2.6 days each (Department of Environment and Conservation and the Bibbulmun Track Foundation, 2008). Those hikers who have completed a hike on the entire Bibbulmun Track (either in one instance or over a number of smaller hikes) are awarded the status of 'end to enders' and are praised for their efforts in the Foundation Newsletter.

**Plate 1:** At the southern terminus of the Bibbulmun Track in Albany.



**From left to right:** Gary, Maya, Frank, Tina, Duan Lian, Yang Xiao, KK, and Ed. Part of a study tour including eminent representatives from China's hiking community.  
**Source:** Author photo

The Bibbulmun Track Foundation is staffed completely by volunteers. The volunteers run the foundation office, providing advice to prospective hikers, equipment for rent, workshops on hiking and hiking safety, special guided hikes for beginners (for a fee), and also assistance in the maintenance of the track, campsites and shelters. In this sense, it offers a particularly attractive example to the evolving hiking community in China, many of whose members see the outdoors as a forum for 'alternative' forms

of action and social interaction, a topic to which we shall return below. As is repeatedly stressed in interviews with Chinese hikers, however, volunteer efforts are severely constrained both by the reality of government micro-control and by the perception that 'nothing can be done' without the involvement of government, which is generally perceived as an obstructive force. This suggests that the fact that Western Australian government has found a role in management of the Track could be significant in persuading both grassroots and officials in China to adopt a positive attitude towards developing new forms of outdoor activity and management.

The Track passes through many towns and communities in its 1,000 kilometre journey from Perth to Albany. These towns serve as important places for hikers to rest and purchase provisions. The towns can also serve as starting and finishing points for those who wish to undertake a short distance hike on the track. The towns through which the track passes are an integral part of the development plan of the Bibbulmun Track. Through the development of the track as an attraction the tourist income generated in the 'track towns' is substantial and has become an important part of the local economy. Based on the 2008 User Survey it is estimated that on the 167,206 walks estimated to take place on the track each year around \$39 million is spent each year as a result of walkers on the Bibbulmun Track (Department of Environment and Conservation and Bibbulmun Track Foundation, 2008). This is particularly relevant in the context of our proposal regarding the Ancient Tea Horse Road. Unlike the Appalachian Trail, the ATHR in Yunnan Province passes through very few areas of true wilderness. There are many small towns on the route and even in its more remote stretches the trail traverses land used or overseen by village and herding communities. Engaging the support of those communities and giving them a stake in the development of the ATHR as a hiking trail would be crucial for successful outcomes.

These examples of world class hiking trails, although not without their own shortcomings and challenges, suggest that models are readily available for China to emulate.<sup>6</sup> Of course no trail can be said to be a perfect solution to local challenges. Choices concerning the balancing of ecological preservation, user access,

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<sup>6</sup> For a video of Ed Jocelyn with Chinese hikers in Tasmania ( Dialogue in Chinese) see <http://redrocktrek.com/blog/?p=1101>

commercial exploitation (for tourism and other natural resources), all need to be considered. Of course sites in China wishing to develop name-branded trails will need to adapt examples of world's best practice to suit local conditions taking into consideration some of the challenges outlined above.

### **The Development of Hiking Tourism in China**

As already noted, China has in recent years experienced a dramatic expansion in interest in outdoor leisure pursuits including hiking. In China tourists who engage in hiking are known as 'donkey friends'. 'Donkey Friends', '*lǔyou*' (驴友) in Chinese, is a pun on the word for 'travel/travelling' (*lǔyou*, 旅游). 'Donkey Friends' are called such because they engage in hiking and, in so doing, invariably carry their provisions and equipment on their backs, plodding along the trail like a donkey.

**Plate 2:** The authors and nature reserve workers on a section of ancient road over the Gaoligong Mountains



Gary Sigley on far right; Ed Jocelyn second from right. Gary is displaying a travel permit for the nature reserve

**Source:** Author photo



**Plate 3** Donkey friends on the trail



Hikers or 'donkey friends' in rural Zhejiang Province, 2012 (Gary second from left)

**Source:** Author photo.

'Lǜ' (绿) is also Chinese for 'green' which by extension also implies 'environment' and 'nature'. Hence the term '*lǜyou*' suggests a 'friend of nature' (although in written Chinese the choice of 驴友 is overwhelming). There is a combined sense of 'do it yourself' and 'getting back to nature' in what the donkey friends do. The 'donkey friend' phenomenon has certainly taken off in recent years. Hundreds if not thousands of outdoor hiking clubs have appeared all over China, facilitated by the rise of social networking platforms such as 'QQ'.<sup>7</sup>

Outdoor fashion and equipment shops have also popped up in the cities like 'bamboo shoots after a spring rain'. Book stores now have growing sections devoted to hiking and hiking trails, as well as backpacking in general and other forms of 'do it

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<sup>7</sup> Huang Xiang (2005) puts the number of hiking clubs in China at 230 and the number of members at 150 thousand. We find this figure to be somewhat outdated and would estimate that the real figure is considerably higher. A quick search for social groups on QQ using the key words 'out doors' (*huwai* 户外) returns over 1,000 groups.

yourself' tourism. China, it seems, is following trends throughout the world that are linking adventure tourism, lifestyle, fashion and image creation with specific forms of consumption, self-expression and individuation. For a summary of those trends as identified in the late 1990s see Buckley (1998).

How can we account for the sudden interest in outdoor hiking and the rapid increase in the ranks of those who call themselves 'donkey friends'? The term 'donkey friend' is a neologism that only appeared in Chinese sometime in the late 1990s/early 2000s. According to preliminary research it first appeared on the Sina travel bulletin boards (新浪旅游论坛) (sina.com is a major Chinese web portal). The Chinese (or Sinophone) Internet is a hothouse for the production of neologisms and it is very hard to keep up with the pace of new word creation. 'Donkey friend' (*lūyou* 驴友) has spawned a whole series of associated neologisms, such as, 'donkey travel' (*lūxing* 驴行) (a 'donkey friend' hiking trip), and 'donkey head' (*lūtou* 驴头) (someone who leads a 'donkey friend' hiking trip). One particularly interesting term that has generated heated discussion verging on moral panic is '*hunzhang*' (混帐) which refers to the practice of mixed-gender tent sharing.

As a practice of social networking 'donkey friend' culture is also a laboratory for the production of new and often innovative social networks and associational activity. In this sense 'donkey friend' is a self-appellation and, although a homonym for 'travel', is clearly meant to distinguish donkey friends from ordinary tourists. Whereas the conventional tourist on your typical package tour seeks entertainment without hardship, the donkey friend puts him/herself through a gruelling regimen, sometimes even quite dangerous or risky, in which 'self-development' is a key factor, the so-called 'embodied exploration of the self' (Cater & Cloke, 2007, p.13).

Furthermore, many conventional tour groups (*lūyoutuan* 旅游团) consist of persons from the same workplace (*danwei* 单位) or community (relatives and neighbours). By contrast, most of the donkey friends are young (under 35 years) urban residents which we divide into two cohorts: the university/college students who are typically organised into university/college outdoor clubs; and the white collar workers who join one of the many 'outdoor clubs' (*huwai julebu* 户外俱乐部) in their vicinity. Of course

there are also many gradients within the extended hiker/outdoor enthusiast community: from the very amateur all the way to the professional/semi-professional adventurer/explorer type. In terms of associational activity it is clear to us that the donkey friends take participation in the group very seriously but do so in ways that step outside conventional Chinese relationship networks, and this is how they differ from the conventional tour group.

**Plate 4** Donkey Friend Club Banner



This banner on display in a small inn in Jiangju is testimony to the increasing presence of hikers along the ancient road. This club, as the furry figure suggests, goes by the name of the 'Koala Hikers'. You can visit the web address in this image and discover that the club is actually quite large and active: <http://www.znfb.com>

**Source:** Author photo

As Zhang Ning (2008) notes, the friendships formed through the 'online' clubs enable individuals to form relationships outside the traditional networks of kinship and workplace. And in so doing the relationships are not burdened by the traditional forms of social responsibility which in China have much to do with obligatory codes of gift giving and reciprocity. Donkey friends reported to Zhang Ning, and our own interactions confirm this, that their relations with other donkey friends are very

relaxed and easy-going and provide a valuable break from both the pressures of urban life and the burdens of obligation and indebtedness of conventional relationships (also see Hu Xuefang, 2010).

Yet apart from the chance to form friendships and relationships (and we have observed that the club network does seem to open up possibilities for finding partners and expanding the so-called 'marriage market') why do the donkey friends do what they do? Urbanisation and modern lifestyles no doubt bring many benefits and are attractive to many people, but urban lifestyles also have serious downsides. Life is hectic and demanding. Cityscapes are crowded and polluted. Escaping to the hills for a few days offers a chance of respite, fresh air and camaraderie. With the ever expanding transport infrastructure it is now possible to get to scenic locations relatively easily. It has thus now become possible, and affordable, to escape the city for a weekend trip to the countryside and hills, and to visit places further afield during designated national holiday periods. This general growth of the leisure economy is an integral part of the Chinese government's plans to stimulate tourism and consumption. Yet as we have noted above, the Chinese hikers, although a growing segment of the market, have been thus far overlooked.

In what we regard as another very modern twist, the donkey friends, whilst definitely enjoying what they do as a group (and they spend much more time interacting on social networking sites than actually out in the field hiking), there is the real sense of developing 'individuality'. In a society such as China which has 'traditionally' emphasised the status of the person in relation to significant others (that is, forming identification in relation to one's position within a familial or social network) and which during the period of 'high socialism' (1949-1978) emphasised the interests of the collective over those of the individual, the development of a strong sense of self-orientation is indeed significant. Part of this has to do with the one child policy in which the post-1980s generations have become the focal point of familial and social investment (the development of 'human capital' you might say), but also more broadly with the emergence of an individual-orientated consumer economy (Yan Yunxiang, 2009).

Part of what the donkey friends are doing here is also performative and playful. For example, 'donkey friends' give themselves nicknames (avatars) such as 'old bear', 'where the wind blows', 'green frog', and 'good mule'. Actually, this is a common practice amongst hikers around the world but the difference in China, it seems to us, is the way these avatars and personas are carried over into use in the social networking environment.

The Chinese hikers' embrace of nature and the outdoors is laudable. The vast majority of hikers head off to the hills with the best of intentions. Yet it needs to be acknowledged that China's hiking culture is still in its infancy and displays a number of features which are negative and counterproductive to the cause of 'returning to nature' (*huigui ziran* 回归自然).

Firstly, as with almost everything in China, the question of scale arises. China is the world's most populous nation at 1.35 billion and counting. With the development of modern mass media and social networking platforms it is very easy to share the latest knowledge of hiking destinations. For the more adventurous hikers who find new trails it can take mere seconds to share this information with millions of others. Communities can suddenly experience a sudden influx of hikers. Needless to say these communities and destinations are unprepared and all manner of ecological and, in some regions, cultural destruction can take place within a short period of time. For this reason many of the more canny hikers keep their favourite locations to themselves, some citing this as a form of environmental protection.

Secondly, Chinese hikers generally lack a strong sense of environmental protection. As avid hikers ourselves we have visited many popular hiking destinations across China and have been alarmed by the problems associated with over capacity and inappropriate (or nonexistent) waste management. Some of this also falls back on the local government and communities where the hiking and other recreational activities take place (more on this below). In any case, whilst other strategies need to be considered, the hikers and hiking clubs need much more education. We envisage that an important part of the branded trail we are proposing here will be public education.



**Plate 5** Litter on the Gaoligong Nature Reserve Southern Silk Road Trail



**Source:** Author photo

In summary, there is a growing body of enthusiastic hikers within China and with the development of modern transport infrastructure these ‘donkey friends’ are seeking new trails to explore. This is a rapidly expanding sector of adventure tourist activity in China that represents both a challenge and an opportunity. The potential number of up and coming ‘donkey friends’ could have a negative impact on sensitive ecological areas;<sup>8</sup> at the same time they represent an excellent source of income to assist in the conservation of China’s natural resources and in poverty alleviation for rural communities. We now turn our attention to our proposal to make the Ancient Tea Horse Road of Yunnan China’s first long distance designated hiking trail.

### **Putting Donkey Friends on the Ancient Tea Horse Road**

The Ancient Tea Horse Road (ATHR) of Southwest China has gained much public recognition within China over the last twenty years as a valuable part of China’s

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<sup>8</sup> For a scathing critique of the habits of donkey friends on the trail refer to Yang Xiao’s essay ‘On Avoiding Donkeys’. Available at: <http://www.chinawatch2050.com/avoiding-donkeys-critical-reflections-on-chinas-emerging-outdoor-adventure-culture> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2013].

cultural heritage.<sup>9</sup> In the wake of China's rapid modernisation there is growing concern as to how to protect and preserve the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the ATHR. There is even a proposal to have the ATHR listed as World Cultural Heritage in the new category of 'cultural routes'. Indeed over the last two decades many locales along the ATHR have already begun the process of preservation by actively identifying the tangible and intangible artefacts associated with the ATHR and registering these items on local and national cultural heritage artefact lists (Sigley 2010, 2013).

Within China the ATHR has thus become a recognised 'brand' that already supports the marketing of products including mass cultural tourism and Yunnan's famous Pu'er tea.<sup>10</sup> The ATHR has come to the attention of local governments and tourism developers as an effective way to develop the local tourism and leisure economy. As early as 2001 a conference was held in Beijing to discuss the possibilities of developing 'Ancient Tea Horse Road Tourism'. Here we wish to outline a strategy for community-based tourism which takes the ATHR as its focal point for the outdoor tourist experience. What we are proposing is the development of branded and well-managed short and long-distance trails across the mountains, valleys and basins of Yunnan that give the hiker an experience of the ATHR. The trail could be undertaken by backpacking hikers or with the assistance of muleteers and small mule teams.

The local communities in areas traversed by the trails benefit by providing the guides, accommodation and supplies for those travellers passing through. Local communities, working with relevant government departments and NGOs, may also be active in the upkeep of the trails. We believe that the conditions are right for the conscious development of this form of ecological community-based hiking tourism in Yunnan. We reach this conclusion based on the following. Firstly, as outlined above, there is a growing interest in ecological community-based tourism within China. We refer to this as 'eco-cultural' to highlight the close connections between the interest in nature and the diverse ethnic cultures of the peoples that call this region 'home' as Yunnan is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in China, if not the world.

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<sup>9</sup> For a map and description of the ATHR follow this link:  
[http://english.cntv.cn/program/documentary/special/ancient\\_tea\\_road/](http://english.cntv.cn/program/documentary/special/ancient_tea_road/)

<sup>10</sup> Puer tea (*camellia sinensis assamica*) is a large leaf variety of tea grown in Puer and Sippsongpanna in Yunnan's southwest.



**Plate 6:** On the trail in Mengla, Xishuangbanna, Yunnan



Ed asking locals about trail conditions and routes

**Source:** Author photo

**Plate 7** Mule caravan team transporting hiking tour supplies.



At the 4,400 metre pass on Tianbao Mountain, Shangri La, Yunnan.

**Source:** Author Photo

There are a number of examples of this eco-cultural tourism in Yunnan. Some of these are community-based and demonstrate that local village and mountain communities are able to successfully organise and manage this kind of tourist venture.<sup>11</sup>

**Plate 8:** Muleteers loading hiking and camping gear on a mule in the historic trading town of Shaxi, Dali, Yunnan



**Source:** Author photo

Secondly, as outlined above, there is also a growing body of Chinese hikers who would be obvious clients for this kind of tourism. Thirdly, the trail we are proposing would include an important element of education and dissemination of 'leave no trace'<sup>12</sup> and other principles associated with sustainable hiking and ecotourism. Finally, there are a number of foreign examples of long-distance hiking trails that have created brands with worldwide recognition. These are excellent models of success that could provide insights into how to establish similar ventures in China. In this paper we have referred to two particular examples: the Appalachian

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<sup>11</sup> See for example <http://www.ecotourism.com.cn/> [accessed 8 February 2014].

<sup>12</sup> The 'Leave No Trace' principles have developed into a major worldwide movement that promotes ethical outdoor leisure pursuits, see [www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org)



Trail and the Bibbulmun Track. If it were possible to establish appropriate study opportunities, the authorities and experts involved in establishing the 'Ancient Tea Horse Road Hiking Trail' could learn valuable lessons from the world-class experience of such well-established and internationally recognised long-distance hiking trails.

### **Challenges and Obstacles to Developing the Ancient Tea Horse Road as a Designated Hiking Trail in Yunnan**

One of the key ingredients for the development of a successful hiking trail is, as McNamara and Prideaux (2011, 294) note, sufficient and appropriate planning. They identify five key components which form the foundations of a feasibility assessment: 1) scientific appraisals that include environmental assessments and analysis of sustainability and carrying capacity thresholds); 2) role of the management authority, with a view to making sure it is adequately resourced, has a clearly defined jurisdiction and has the authority to carry out its mission; 3) adequate analysis of demand factors, that is, how potential visitors would like to use the resources and what infrastructure is required; 4) role of commercial inputs, that is, the role of the public and private sectors; and 5) proper key stakeholder input and community consultation 'to ensure that pre-existing cultural and heritage values are respected and conserved'. With these measures in mind we also identify the following issues that need to be taken into consideration.

Firstly, the establishment of such long-distance hiking trails requires strong support from government authorities. It requires the development of well researched and defined strategic plans and assessments, and of course proper community consultation and involvement. Government may have other priorities when it comes to the development of tourism and may not regard this particular form of outdoor tourism as feasible. It may be possible that some local communities can take the initiative themselves in this regard, but of course without government support the venture is less likely to succeed. To be truly successful it will need the support of the Yunnan Provincial Government and the relevant local government authorities. A strategy for engaging such support therefore needs to be designed and implemented. Secondly, it assumes the development of modern transport infrastructure to enable participants from the eastern regions to travel quickly and relatively affordably to the

site. In many places in Yunnan, with the expansion of highways and expressways and the building of airports, this is now being realised. Thirdly, the rapid development of road networks, automobility (the rise of the motor car), and spread of metropolitanism will make the task of finding suitable trails more difficult. A balance needs to be found between accessibility and 'wilderness'.

**Plate 9:** Wildlife on the trail



The ancient trails pass through some of China's most sensitive ecological environments. Measures need to be taken to ensure the impact of recreational activities are minimised.

**Source:** Author photo

Fourthly, there are some inherent dangers in this kind of tourism and issues to do with insurance and liability need to be addressed. The hikers need to be educated in basic principles of safety and sustainability. Also local guides need to be adequately trained in many different areas including the provision of emergency wilderness medical assistance. In this connection there are locally based non-profit organisations already involved in training rescue workers, but the training needs are still much larger than supply and financial constraints can currently accommodate. Besides local guides, consideration may also be given to the funding and training of professional 'rangers' to provide oversight and education to visitors in particularly

areas of ecological sensitivity. Finally, China can only take limited lessons from international hiking trail brands in developed countries and will need to explore and develop the connections between hiking trails, community-based tourism and poverty alleviation that apply to its own unique conditions.

In addressing some of these concerns we note the following. Firstly, this form of outdoor activity does carry risks. Hikers could get injured (and be a long way from medical assistance) or lost on the trail. In recent years the Chinese media has reported on numerous incidents where hikers have either gotten lost or injured (sometimes both). There have been a number of fatalities (including both hikers and rescuers). Undertaking such activities is no simple matter and needs to be taken very seriously, and indeed the fear of injury is a major disincentive for local governments as it generates negative publicity. However, as international experience suggests, on trails that are well marked, managed and patrolled, hikers rarely get lost or suffer serious injury. Hikers are encouraged to follow certain basic principles when it comes to walking the trail, such as registration with relevant authorities, making sure they employ experienced local guides (if necessary), and take the appropriate equipment and supplies. Injuries can take place in all forms of activity, even in crossing the road on a suburban street, but with careful planning and training the risk can be reduced substantially. Part of the role of the proposed support organisation (that is, the 'Ancient Tea Horse Road Hiking Trail Foundation') would be to ensure that hikers acquire basic knowledge to help deal with accidents on the trail. Local guides would also need training to deal with medical emergencies and evacuation plans for medical treatment. Encouraging hikers on the trail to have adequate medical and evacuation insurance also needs to be considered. An examination of the major hiking trails around the world reveals that serious accidents are rare and that most are the result of lack of adequate planning and experience. Secondly, as we have noted above, large numbers of hikers could seriously impact on the natural environment. One of China's most well-known environmental activists, public educators and Director of Friends of Nature (自然之友), Li Bo, has this to say on the challenges of balancing tourism and environment in China's mountainous regions:

City dwellers return to nature hoping to escape from modernisation's reinforced concrete. Yet they can't really escape the commercial

consumerism that they helped to create. I fear their 'back to nature' consumption attitude is damaging the people-land relationships, and the social capitals sustaining such relationships. Both are fundamental for the welfare of high land dwellers whose livelihoods are unthinkable without the forest, grassland and mountains. If the cost of tourism and exploitation of natural resources in the name of economic development is at the expense of the above, then the so-called contributions of modernisation for marginalized people – through tourism for city dwellers – constitutes a disaster, an unfortunate degradation and devolution of our relationships with nature. (cited in Li Bo and Xie Hongyan, 2003: 12)

After scientific appraisals and stakeholder consultation, it may be decided that on some sections of the trail the number of hikers needs to be regulated and a permit system put in place. Such permit systems operate in a number of trails around the world and are used to manage the number of hikers and thereby reduce the impact on the environment and generally improve hiker experience.

A part of the challenge in China when it comes to balancing conservation and tourism in the National Forest Parks (*guojia senlin gongyuan* 国家森林公园) is that such parks have been established with the primary aim of developing recreation and leisure activities. In this model it is clear that the protection of biodiversity and ecological systems comes second to an interest in landscape aesthetics (that is, façade management). As a result, as Huang, et al. (2008, 67) note, China's nature zones, 'have experienced many negative impacts as a result of tourism development.' Yet the survey results published by Huang, et al. concerning one particular National Forest Park overwhelmingly indicated that visitors placed more emphasis on ecological integrity than uses of the park for recreational purposes and are willing to see limitations on visitor numbers.

Thirdly, we also need to consider the different cultural values and recreational preferences of Chinese hikers. Blindly adopting western models will not work without adequate cultural integration. In their cross-cultural comparative study Buckley, et al. (2008, 954) note that 'there is indeed a cultural distinction between *shengtai lüyou* ['ecotourism' in Chinese] and ecotourism', that is, Chinese tourists prefer to visit



ecotourist sites in large groups (a phenomenon we have also observed in donkey friend activities). China has a long cultural and literary history of shaping the natural landscape with buildings, calligraphy, and so on. Buckley, et al. (ibid) argue, therefore, that Chinese ecotourists have a different expectation of what constitutes 'nature'. 'The Western concept of ecotourism, therefore, has not been adopted wholesale within China: rather, it acted as a seed crystal, a timely concept which allowed the parallel concept of *shengtai lüyou* to arise from parallel issues and practices with regards to tourism and environment in China.' (ibid, 962)

Finally, the costs of managing and maintaining the trail also need to be considered. We believe it is imperative to make the trail accessible as possible. It may be that hikers are required to pay entrance fees which are used for the maintenance of the trail. Any fees should, however, be reasonable. There are many studies in foreign countries that point to the problem of socio-economic background and participation in leisure pursuits, including outdoor recreation (Lee, Scott and Floyd, 2001). In this regard we believe that corporate sponsorship in the spirit of promoting public good would be essential.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have proposed the creation of a long distance marked hiking trail in Yunnan that uses the concept of the 'Ancient Tea Horse Road' as a branding device and cultural-ecological attraction. This is a very ambitious proposal but we believe that in this paper the basic concept has been laid out and examples drawn from both within China and abroad that demonstrate that there is potential demand for such an attraction and also models for successful and sustainable management.

There are a number of obstacles and challenges to this kind of leisure pursuit and we have attempted to outline some of them here and to suggest some solutions. A lot more planning and consideration of course needs to take place and we only consider this paper to be the first step in initiating further research and discussion. The long distance caravans no longer travel on the Ancient Tea Horse Road but we believe there is no reason why hikers and mule teams could not return to some form of well managed and marked trail and follow the footsteps of the muleteers who in times past made such a valuable contribution to the development of Southwest

China. Although the 'outdoor adventure industry' has experienced rapid expansion in China in recent years there is still much room for expansion and growth, and of course for appropriate industry supervision and regulation. With the right foundations and conditions, over time the 'Ancient Tea Horse Road Trail' could become a favoured destination for Chinese and foreign hikers, and indeed, for all people who love the outdoors and are seeking a chance to escape the pressures of modern urban life.

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